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THOUGHTS *on* LYRIC POETRY.

By WILLIAM PRESTON, *M.R.I.A.*

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IT is with some diffidence that I venture to express my dissent from the opinion of a writer, whose success as a poet must add weight and influence to his sentiments as a critic, I mean Mr. Maſon ; but false criticisms falling from men of high character have a most pernicious effect, particularly with readers who seldom venture to think for themselves. Assertions may be hazarded rashly on the spur of the occasion, even by the most judicious ; and when we meet with any thing paradoxical, we should not be deterred from examining it, by the terrors of a great name, lest we should mistake unfounded assumptions, for good arguments, and chimerical speculations, for first principles.

Read December 11,  
1786.

IN the following paper I propose to offer some remarks, on an opinion of Mr. Maſon's respecting lyric poetry, which he has

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published in a note on Mr. Gray's seventh ode, in his edition of that author's works.

THE note to which I allude runs thus:—" This ode, to  
 " which in the title I have given the epithet of irregular, is the  
 " only one of the kind which Mr. Gray ever wrote, and its  
 " being written *occasionally* and *intended for music* is a sufficient  
 " apology for the defect. Exclusive of this, for a defect it certainly  
 " is, it appears to me, in point of lyrical arrangement and ex-  
 " pression, to be equal to most of his other odes. It is remark-  
 " able that amongst the many irregular odes which have been  
 " written in our language, Dryden and Pope's on St. Cecilia's  
 " day are the only ones that may properly be said to have lived.  
 " The reason is, as I have hinted, that this mode of composition  
 " is so extremely easy, that it gives the reins to every kind of  
 " poetical licentiousness; whereas the regular succession of  
 " *strophe*, *antistrophe*, and *epode*, put so strong a curb on the  
 " wayward imagination, that when she has once paced in it, she  
 " seldom chooses to submit to it a second time; 'tis therefore  
 " greatly to be wished, that in order to stifle in their birth a  
 " quantity of compositions which are at the same time wild and  
 " jejune, regular odes, and those only, should be esteemed legi-  
 " timate amongst us."

I AM not surprized that such a remark should fall from one  
 who has written so many regular odes; the most candid poet  
 may feel his judgment in some degree warped by his poetical  
 studies; we find Dryden, at one time, a champion for rhyming  
 tragedies, at another recommending alternate rhymes, as the most  
 eligible

eligible heroic measure: from the same cause, and perhaps with as much justice in both instances, as Mr. Mason stickles for the regular ode. I must own I was surprized to find the odes of Pope and Dryden on St. Cecilia's day classed together, as if the two productions were of equal merit; indeed, I was surprized to hear Pope's ode mentioned, as a poem which may still be said to live.

I AM somewhat at a loss to determine whether Mr. Mason, in the note in question, means by the term *regular ode* a poem which exhibits the regular succession of *strophe*, *antistrophe* and *epode*, or that merely which is confined to an uniform and regularly repeated stanza. If we are to apply this denomination to poems of the first class only, the number of odes is but small, comparatively speaking, and of that number many are faint and weak, and many sleep; certainly, such of them as have stood their ground are far inferior in number and merit to their irregular brethren. If we are to understand the term *regular ode* in the latter and more extensive sense, then it follows, that a trifling ballad or song will be a *regular ode*, and pass for *sterling*, because of the uniform returning stanza, while no regularity of plan, no lyrical arrangement, or propriety of sentiment, will exempt from the charge of irregularity an ode, which unluckily admits a variety of stanza.

THE mere regular return of an uniform stanza, if that stanza does not afford a copious interchange of melodious sounds, is not a work of much difficulty in the execution, or merit in the

perusal ; neither can it be said to impose any very strong, at least it does not impose any very useful curb, on the wayward imagination ; nor will it, I presume, be found a very effectual means of excluding compositions *wild* and *jejune* : In truth, I am inclined to doubt whether this desirable end can be obtained by the adoption of *strophe*, *antistrophe* and *epode*. It would be invidious to quote particular instances, but any one who will take the trouble of turning over some of our miscellaneous collections, and other books of modern poetry, will find things called odes, which are at once wild and jejune, though trimmed and laced up in the straight waistcoat of *strophe*, *antistrophe* and *epode*, according to all the severities of the Greek masters.

MR. MASON insists on the small number of irregular odes, which, as he says, deserve to be ranked with the *living*, as an argument against this species of composition. He confines the catalogue to narrow limits, Dryden's and Pope's odes on St. Cecilia's day. Suppose this for a moment to be just, is not Dryden's ode of sufficient excellence and dignity, to give a new form of composition, and become the archetype, and as I may say, the founder of a distinct poetical family ? Is not the *Complaint* of Cowley to all intents and purposes lyrical ? Do his *pindaric* odes, which are professedly irregular, deserve to be involved in the indiscriminate doom of death ? Even the severe Hurd, in his *Castrations* of Cowley, has reprieved and admitted some of them into his collection. I know not to what class we shall refer Milton's *Lycidas* ; to me it seems to belong to the *genus* of irregular

gular odes. Mr. William Browne, an excellent poet of the last century, has left a beautiful irregular ode, written on a like affecting occasion with the *Lycidas*, and not much inferior to it in poetical merit: and here, by the by, I must mention, though somewhat out of place, that there is a very early specimen, indeed, of the irregular ode in the English language, I mean a poem on the death of Henry the First, which bears marks of the highest antiquity, and may be found in a collection, called 'The Muse's Library. Perhaps Dryden's secular ode does not deserve to be mentioned on this occasion, though surely it ranks higher than Pope's ode on St. Cecilia's day. But it would be unpardonable to omit the admirable, and I must add, much injured Collins, who has left several beautiful specimens of the *irregular lyric*, which do not deserve to be numbered with the dead, nay, which cannot die while any regard for harmonious versification and classical composition subsists among us.

IF the irregular ode is a species of composition so extremely easy, is it not wonderful that it has not been more generally adopted? If it is such a temptation to rash meddlers in poetry, one might be led to suppose that the English language must be overflowed with irregular odes; but we find, on the contrary, that this mode of composition is far from being frequent among us. I believe there are in English more *regular* than there are *irregular* odes. The reason of this may be easily explained: The severe form of the antient regular lyric has in it something elaborate, uncommon, and fit to impose on the minds of vulgar readers, who are apt to admire what they do not understand, and enables a heavy mediocrity of talents, by the use of a little pains and study, not only to impose on the world, and  
acquire

acquire at least a transient popularity, but even to impose on the writer himself. If the irregular ode has introduced compositions wild and jejune, the pedantry of the Anglo-Grecian lyric has contributed to the propagation of verses that are tame and infipid, made up of epithets and unmeaning verbiage, and disguised with foreign idioms.

THE introduction of *strophe*, *antistrophe* and *epode* into English poetry is not only unnecessary, but unaccountable. There is not a single instance of it in Malherbe, that great master of French lyric poetry, who was a very correct and classical writer. Ben Johnson, a servile imitator of the ancients, was, I believe, the first who introduced it in English, under the denomination of *turn*, *return*, and *counter-turn*. Among the Greeks themselves the use of the *strophe*, *antistrophe* and *epode* was not adopted universally and indiscriminately in every species of the ode. If we are to believe the ancient grammarians, the models of the Greek lyric, in which this division is adopted, were all composed to be sung by a chorus\*, and accompanied with dancing; and

\* This union of poetry, music and dancing, is inexplicable enough to us, whose manners are so different from those of the ancients; however, there cannot be any doubt of the fact; to prove it, I need only adduce part of a chorus in the *Hercules furens* of Euripides, which manifestly alludes to it:

Ὅου παυσσεται ἱας χαρῆας	antis β.
μυσσας συγκαταμινῶσ	παιανα μεν δηλαδες
ἡδῖαν συζυγίαν,	υμνος ἄμφι πύλας
ἔει ζῶν μετ' ευμυσσας	λαῖες εὐπαιδα γονον
αἰε δ' ἐν στεφανοισιν εἰην	ελισσασθαι καλλιχορον.
* * *	
παρὰ ἴε βρομιον δινοδοῖαν	
παρὰ ἴε χελυῶ ἐπὶ πλοῖον	
μολπαν καὶ λιβυν ἄνλων	
ὄντω καταπαυσσεται	
μυσσας αἰ μ' ἐχορὸν σταν.	

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the *strophe*, *antistrophe* and *epode*, as the etymology of their names seems to import, had a reference to the song and dance. The first stanza, called *strophe*, they sung, dancing at the same time; the second, called the *antistrophe*, was sung while the dance was inverted; the *epode* they sung standing still. In corroboration of this opinion, we find that the odes which pursue this form were either in honour of the victors in some of the Grecian games, and intended to be sung by a chorus at the entertainments given by the conquerors, to whom they were inscribed, or by their friends, on account of their victories, or at the solemn sacrifices made to the Gods on those occasions, as the odes of Pindar which have reached our time; or else make part of some dramatic poem, and were intended to be performed on the stage by a chorus, in like manner, and accompanied with dancing. Thus we see in what odes, and why, this complicated regularity, this threefold correspondence of uniform and regularly repeated stanzas, was adopted. We find it was not employed in the Greek poetry intended for other purposes, and not composed with a view to music. Horace, who studied the Greeks with great care, admired them exceedingly, and was a very correct writer, has not thought proper to introduce the *strophe*, *antistrophe* and *epode* into Latin poetry; and why? doubtless because he well knew that they were appropriated to poetry intended to be set to music, and performed by a chorus. Is it not then a pedantic and idle affectation to adopt in English poetry a regulation which was rejected by the Latins, and not universally employed even by the Greeks themselves, but only when the subject made it necessary that the ode should be set to music, and performed with an accompaniment of dancing? It seems to me that it would



would be more rational to suppose that all our English odes were to be set to music, and to divide them into *recitative*, *air* and *chorus*.

Mr. Mason seems to rely on another principle as certain and incontrovertible, in which, notwithstanding, I cannot readily bring myself to acquiesce: that by encreasing the difficulty of writing poetry, we promote its excellence; and, in particular, that by rendering a subordinate and merely mechanical part of poetry (for instance, the measure) more operose and inconvenient to the composer, we shall succeed in checking the growth of bad poetry; I say this, supposing for the present, but by no means admitting, the irregular ode to be, as Mr. Mason supposes, a species of composition of the utmost facility. On this principle of exalting the beauties of poetry, by encreasing its difficulties, which, by the by, seems to be just such an experiment as if we should attempt to add grace and agility to a dancer by encumbering his legs with fetters, or speed a courser by loading him with a heavy burthen; on this principle where shall we stop? What bounds of difficulty and consequent perfection shall we appoint? If, in order to deter rash meddlers, the composition of an ode is to be rendered more difficult, by wantonly dividing it into *strophe*, *antistrophe* and *epode*, why rest there? Let the sanctuary of good writing be still more effectually secured from prophane intruders, by ordaining that lyric poems should be always written in the shape of a *flute*, a *pair of wings*, an *egg*, an *ax*, or an *altar*? Some Greek writers have attempted all these fantastic forms of composition; but is the merit of the poems of this kind, which have reached us, in any degree proportioned

portioned to the difficulty? Has the difficulty of composing *rondeaux*, *acrostics* and *charades* delivered the French language from a mob of writers at once wild and jejune? To pursue this reasoning a little farther: It is acknowledged on all hands that French versification is subject to a very severe and tyrannical code of rules; it is much more difficult to write poetry in that language, than it is in the Latin, Greek, Italian or English. Now, have meaner spirits been deterred by this difficulty? Is the number of minor poets less in the French than in other languages? Or is the comparative excellence of the French poetry great, in proportion to the discouragements which are thrown in the way of their writers, by the severe laws of versification? The French writers complain of this tyrannical code as an heavy grievance, and so intolerable is the burthen, that some of their best poets, particularly Corneille, the first of French bards, violate the laws of versification without scruple. Indeed I had always been taught to hold an opinion directly contrary to this position, and to believe, that in proportion as the execution of the mechanical part in the fine arts is easy, there is a greater prospect of attaining to general excellence; and to common understandings this opinion would seem to be well-founded. The pains, study and time which will be exhausted in adjusting the mere mechanical part, when it is of a more difficult form, may, when that difficulty is removed, be employed on a nobler care, that of considering the plan, removing defects, and heightening the beauties, by correcting, retouching and polishing the whole. I have often heard blank verse preferred to rhyme, on this very ground, that it imposed less troublesome restraints on the poet; and I had observed that in those languages which are

called, by way of distinction, *poetical* (as the Italian) the mechanical of poetry is most easy, which could not be the case if the difficulty of composition were a pledge and guarantee for its excellence. I suppose it is on this principle of attaining excellence, by inducing difficulty, that Mr. Hayley has produced his comedies in rhyme; and on the same system it would follow, that tragedies also ought to be written in *rhyme*, as being a more difficult mode of versification; in short, if by enhancing the difficulty of poetical composition you should lessen the number of bad poets, will you not lessen the number of good ones? There is greater merit, certainly, in the attainment of excellence in something very difficult; but in such a case the number of excellent productions will be small in proportion.

THE more I consider the introduction of *strophe*, *antistrophe* and *epode* into the English language, the more am I struck with the impropriety of it; on what principle of reason are we required to adopt the regulations of composition, which prevailed in a dead language, of a structure wholly different from our own, and with the true pronunciation of which we are not fully acquainted? It seems to be very unjust, to impose on English poets the same strictness, with regard to the stanza, and structure of the ode, which prevails in Pindar, and the chorus of the Greek tragedy. The genius of their language does not furnish the English writers with the same instruments and means of facilitating their compliance with the law. 1, Both the Greek and Latin languages have a great advantage in the bold and frequent inversions of words, which they not only permit, but require; this must have assisted the poet amazingly in attain-  
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ing an harmonious arrangement of words, and a rich and easy versification. 2, The Greek language admitted a variety of dialects, which the poet might intermix, as suited his convenience ; this gave a greater choice and variety of synonymous sounds, and greatly facilitated the task of composition. 3, The Latin poet found the same convenience in poetical license ; but the Greek language allowed it in a still higher degree, more freely indeed than any language I know, except the Italian. Now this privilege is very sparingly, if at all, indulged to an English writer, whose task in versifying is therefore so much the more difficult. 4, Both the Greek and Latin lyric poets took the liberty of ending the line in the midst of a word, if the versification happened to require it, as you may see in every page of Horace and Pindar ; indeed, there are in Virgil instances of such a license, even in heroic verse. A liberty of this sort would not be endured in English ; I question whether even the charms of the *strophe*, *antistrophe* and *epode* could reconcile it to those who want the true antiquated classic ear. 5, The antients went still greater lengths ; there are instances of a stanza or *strophe* ending in the middle of a word, and the remainder carried over to the next stanza ; as for example, in the second *antistrophe* of the third Olympic of Pindar, which ends in the middle of a word, and the second *epode*, which begins with the remaining syllable :

δὴ τοί εἰ γαίαν περὶν θυμὸν ὤρμαι  
 ἐπὶ δὲ β  
 ὦ Ἰβριαν νῦν. εἰδα Δαίης, &c.

HAVING hazarded these cursory remarks on the critical opinions contained in the note above-mentioned, permit me to add a

few arguments in favour of the irregular ode. In the first place, it has the sanction of classic authority to recommend it; the ancients, our great, and indeed inimitable masters in poetry, they, who imposed every necessary curb on the wayward imagination, and were not often guilty of wild or jejune writing, the illustrious ancients loved and practised this species of composition. The most celebrated and sublime of Pindar's works were irregular odes, I mean his *Dithyrambics*; on these, though they have unfortunately perished in the wreck of time, his reputation as a poet was most essentially founded. We have the suffrage of as good a critic as he was a poet, both as to their merit and their bold irregularity :

Seu per audaces nova Dithyrambos  
Verba devolvit, Numerisque fertur  
Lege solutis.

HORACE.

THE ancient grammarians and critics recognize the *polymetra* and *pammetra* of the ancients, in which verses of all different measures were employed, without any uniform order or connexion. Claudian, Terentianus Maurus, and Martianus Capellus, have all written lyric poems, each of which takes in a variety of different stanzas; that of Claudian was written on the marriage of the Emperor Honorius. If we are to believe an ingenious French critic\*, the secular ode of Horace was an irregular one, or to speak more correctly, a *multiform* lyric, embracing a free variety of different stanzas. Whether the con-

\* Sanadon.

jecture of Mr. Sanadon, as to the junction of the several parts which he brings together, be well or ill founded, it serves to support my argument, as it shews that in the opinion of a learned man and a good critic the irregular ode was by no means alien from the correct genius of classic poetry.

WE may also alledge the example of the Italian lyric poets in favour of the irregular ode; there are a great number of beautiful compositions of that species in their language, particularly by Chiabrera and Metastasio, a writer to whom the epithets of wild and jejune can hardly be applied with any propriety. Fontaine, among the French, may be considered as a great master in the irregular lyric. Among us, the correct and laborious Ben Johnson, as he was the first importer of the *strophe*, *antistrophe* and *epode*, has given us also the first English precedent of an irregular ode, if I mistake not, in the poem on the burning of his works.

BUT why resort to *precedent* for a justification of the *irregular ode*? I may entrench myself in stronger ground, the internal evidence of its merit, and the obvious advantages which result from this species of composition. First, it leaves the poet at liberty to follow the order and connexion of his ideas, and to express them in the most apt and forcible manner. He is not obliged to sacrifice strength and energy to stanza, to become a literary Procrustes, and torture out some thoughts through a nerveless extent of prolix tenuity, while others are proportionably cut and cramped, to make them fit the stanza. He is not stopt short, in the very heat and *acme*, of composition, as it were  
by

by a great gulf, or obliged to introduce alien or unnecessary ideas, in order to square his matter with his measure, and preserve the preconceived division of his poem into partitions of a certain unvarying length. The stanza is commensurate to the sense, and exhibits nothing redundant, nothing incoherent or disjointed; the thought occupies just as much room as it deserves, and no more, while the poet has it in his power, to express it, as fully, or as concisely as he thinks proper.

SECONDLY. Add to this, that the irregular ode requires no supernumerary or expletive epithets to eke out lines, none of those unmeaning subservient lines, that are introduced merely to eke out stanzas, and of which some of our modern regular odes exhibit such melancholy instances; in short, the irregular ode is not obliged to sacrifice a just arrangement, clear expression, or harmonious versification, to a chimerical and pedantic regularity, which has no foundation in true harmony, and is wholly foreign from the genius of our language.

THIRDLY. You will please to consider, that if the author of a regular ode has a bad ear, and is unfortunate in the choice of the stanza, his readers must take it, for better for worse, through the whole poem, a grievance, to which the irregular ode is not liable; for there, if one stanza should be unhappily fancied, or inharmonious, we have a prospect of being relieved, and changing for the better in the next; perhaps too, the ear, in an ode of any length, may feel itself cloyed with the uniformity of a stanza so frequently repeated, and be relieved and gratified by the various melody of the irregular ode.

FOURTHLY.

FOURTHLY. I must further observe, that although we should allow the composition of the irregular ode, to be, as Mr. Mason is pleased to assert, more easy, it imposes on the poet a necessity of verifying with greater care, and satisfying the ear with a melody more full and compleatly rounded. The harmony of verification cannot so easily make itself to be felt by the reader, when the stanza comes in a new and unforeseen form, as when the ear is habituated, and *broken*, as I may say, to the expected march of an uniformly repeated stanza. When the hearer is prepared for the return of the pause at regular intervals, he learns to mistake the mere technical arrangement of the lines for harmonious verification, and hardly allows himself to enquire, whether the stop is judiciously placed, or the period duly filled, so as to leave the ear perfectly satisfied. In the irregular ode there is no such deception, the ear is not imposed on, and any fault in the verification will be immediately perceived.

FIFTHLY. A correspondence of the sound with the sentiment is certainly a very great beauty, and the poet should endeavour to obtain it, whenever it may be had, without sacrificing more important things. This beauty may sometimes result from the happy force of a single word, sometimes it is produced by the structure and cadence of a single line, but is effected most forcibly and most generally by the arrangement and symmetry of a whole period \*. Now, I believe it cannot be denied, and therefore

\* Example of the first :

Procumbit humi bos.

Of the second :

Monstrum



fore I shall not waste words to prove, that a free stanza, which may be varied at will, and made light and airy, flow and plaintive, or swelling and sonorous, according to the subject matter, will give the poet a much better chance of attaining this excellence, whatever may be its value. The judicious break, the happy pause, the apt change of cadence, the long majestic march and energy divine, may all in their turns be excluded by a servile adherence to the uniformity of stanza; and I cannot think of a single advantage, which attends this uniformity exclusively, except that of enhancing the difficulty of composition.

SUCH being the advantages which attend the irregular ode, it seems to be rather immaterial to enquire into the comparative difficulty of writing it; I shall only observe, that being simple and unaffected in its form, and disclaiming every thing elaborate and artificial, it is supposed to be much easier than in truth it is, and less credit is given to the author of an irregular ode for the pains and study he employs, than to those, who deal in more operose forms of poetry.

*Monstrum horrendum informe ingens cui Lumen ademptum.*

*Sola in ficcâ fecum spatiatûr Arenâ.*

Of the third:

She bids you,  
All on the wanton rushes lay you down,  
And rest your gentle head upon her lap,  
And she will sing the song that pleaseth you,  
And on your eye-lids crown the God of Sleep,  
Charming your blood with pleasing heaviness.

SHAKESPEARE.

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It cannot be denied, that a species of composition which adopts the construction of the *rhythmus*, and even the sound of particular words to the subject, must have its foundation in the genuine undepraved feelings of human nature. I have not a doubt within my mind of the irregular ode being the first form of composition adopted by mankind, in their first wild attempts at literature. Poetry has ever been the delight of men in the first stages of society: the earliest recitals of events among them have been in verse; this arises from the connexion between certain sounds and the feelings of the mind, as well as the memory. The first literary production, in an unpolished nation, where the pure dictates of nature prevailed, was a poem, and that poem an irregular ode. Whether the subject of the rude minstrelsy was the feather-cinctured chiefs, or dusky loves, the untutored feelings of the heart teaching expressions, and suggesting sounds attuned and attuned to that subject, the stanza varied with the sense, and the spontaneous descant became an irregular ode. I am very confident, that the death song and the war song, which have such an influence on the spirits of American warriors, are irregular odes; and I am confirmed in my opinion, by finding that several specimens of the antient poetry of uncivilized nations bear this form. In Scheffer's History of Lapland you will find two instances of the irregular ode, which have great poetical merit, and are well known by the English translations of them.

I SHALL conclude with expressing a wish, that these hasty reflections may be the means of exciting some poetical genius to make trial of a species of composition, which, in my mind, is peculiarly susceptible of true sublimity.

P O S T S C R I P T.

I have ventured, by way of note, to subjoin an irregular ode, in which I have endeavoured to reduce into practice some of the principles laid down in the foregoing essay; how I have succeeded in the attempt to illustrate my doctrine, the candid reader must determine; perhaps, the example, instead of strengthening my theory, will be quoted as a strong justification of Mr. Maſon's assertions.

IRREGULAR